



Texas Farm Workers' Union

FARMWORKERS AND THE 80'S

by Antonio Orendain

As we look forward to the eighties and our new strategies, it will be wise to evaluate the successes and failures of the seventies. We must remember how, that at the beginning it was said that the seventies would be the years of the Chicanos. Very pretty phrases were coined and many of the young militant Chicano leaders, whom had just finished college, were the new leaders of the movement who began to shape the new Chicana Onda.

This new Onda, with its new ideas and new found education, slowly but surely entered the "Free Enterprise" system, and it is very sad to admit and to accept that they adopted the American Tradition of "that if you can't beat them -- join them."

Today we are once again at that point in time of making another new effort on behalf of the Chicanos and the challenge before us is the decade of the eighties, and what our goals will be. The importance of these goals will be made by each of us as individualists, and we will have to deal with our own egos just like they did in the seventies. We make this affirmation because the past decade records the personal, individual, and egotistical efforts of some of those leaders that conformed by serving the system - those that were lucky served the administration and then told of how it was to be a "Taco Twister" and then resigned. Others said they tried to change the system from within, but have been convinced that it would be easier to change a whorehouse into a convent, than it would be to change the cruel exploitation that each day gets worse, especially for all of us, who remained in the bottom of the social barrel due to our lack of education.

For the 1980's, more Chicano leaders will follow their brilliant paths but some will lose in the end, just like the falling stars lose their brightness when it makes contact with the earth's atmosphere. Some will no longer be in contact with the sad reality of the severe poverty of the farmworkers, but this shouldn't be motive for us to quit and then start crying like children, just because we are afraid to fight like men.

The Texas Farm Workers' Union will continue to struggle, because we think that it is better to die on our feet than to live on our knees. We are strategizing not how we are going to come across with pretty phrases for the Chicanos in the 80's, instead we have plans not only for the 80's but our goals are long range and dedicated to a struggle which will not be lost in the midst of egoism and false patriotism that as individuals we use as excuses for our own economical benefit. When we affirm that our goal is far away in the future, it is because we are struggling for collective bargaining rights for farmworkers -- "that sacred right to put a price on the sweat of our brow" -- and we also struggle against the Taft-Hartley Act, particularly section 14(b) of that act, which creates that misnamed law known as the "right-to-work" law. These two goals are our struggle and for these we certainly will struggle until the end of our lives. We are convinced that our goals are still far away, but we struggle without fear because as Antonio Plaza said, "hombre que el luchar no te asombre, porque nacio para luchar el hombre, como para volar el ave."

Our goals are clearly marked out for us, the struggle for collective bargaining rights for farmworkers is one that for the past three years we have worked for continuously. We have made two marches in our state to dramatize the needs of our people and on both occasions we have continued to build more support for the passage of such legislation. The introduction of a Texas Agriculture Labor Relations Act was initiated by State Representatives Gonzalo Barrientos, Matt Garcia and Paul Moreno in 1977, this was the first time in Texas history that such legislation was ever introduced.

The legislation we proposed would establish an Agriculture Labor Relations Board in order that the farmworkers through a democratic process could organize into the union of their choice. The law would provide a method by which farmworkers could petition the Board for a secret ballot election, which would be conducted within seven day after filing. If more than 50% of the workers selected a union as its bargaining agent, then by law the company would be required to sit down and negotiate in good faith. A penalty would be imposed on both parties if the law is ignored, therefore both parties would be protected equally.

This right to freely join a union, without intimidation and/or harassment, and the recognition of one's union by the employer is a crucial and basic human right. Farmworkers have found themselves denied this protection by legislative exclusion. In 1935, Congress passed the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA) which was ostensibly designed to protect the rights of workers to organize and bargain collectively through democratically chosen representatives. Yet farmworkers were specifically excluded when this bill was passed. This was not because farmworkers were not attempting to organize, because between 1930 and 1939 there were 275 strikes reported in agriculture involving over 177,788 strikers in more than twenty-eight states of the union, but because the growers and agribusiness in a multi-billion dollar industry and through their strength of the almighty dollars in our society, they had the ability and influence to control the communications media and legislative lobbies. The argument for exclusion of farmworkers was so well orchestrated by them that even today -- forty-four years later -- farmworkers still do not have the legal protection by which to organize.

This has led our campaign to a new height of awareness and in 1977, the farmworkers of Texas started the "March for Human Rights" which our members bravely walked for more than 1800 miles from Austin, Texas to Washington, D.C. This march led them through the deep South, carrying the message that it was time that the human rights of farmworkers and poor people be dealt with by the national legislators of our nation. Also that President Carter could not call out for human rights abroad and ignore the human rights of farmworkers and the poor here at home. This experience showed us that people all over this land care about farmworkers and we called upon them to help us reach the politicians in order that the farmworker could begin to impress upon the legislators that it was now time to begin to listen and hear the suffering of our people but also time to begin to address the need for national legislation which would give farmworkers true human rights and the dignity of the right to negotiate collectively with employers.

In Texas in 1979, once again an Agriculture Labor Relations Act was introduced by State Representatives Tony Garcia and Paul Moreno. This battle took hold, but this time it was like the beginning of a new day, the bill was supported by the Texas Catholic Conference, the Texas Conference of Churches, the National L.U.L.A.C., the National G.I. Forum, and many more organizations. The independent farmer organizations: the Texas Farm Union and the American Agriculture Movement, began dialogue and discussions with the Texas Farm Workers' Union concerning who was the real enemy and sought out a way to support each others movements. Then the Farm Bureau brought in its National "Big Gun", Jack Angel, to defend its position and even went as far as to introduce an anti-collective bargaining bill, or in other words, a wolf in sheep's clothing. Although they killed our bill in committee this session, the tide has been changed and we feel confident that soon the victory will be ours. But the victory will not belong to just the farmworkers but to all the people who stand and struggle with us.

Our second goal is the defeat of the Taft-Hartley Act, which in 1947, the legislators in response to the great number of workers organizing into unions, passed this law in order to supposedly equalize the power between labor and management. In fact what they did was set up the procedures by which management would destroy the attempt of workers to organize in this country. The act stripped the workers of all solidarity, stopped all strikes for recognition, set up anti-boycott laws and provided the company with the process by which to appeal and stall decisions concerning the workers rights and therefore slowly destroying any group of workers' right to effectively organize. The most recent example of workers being defeated because of this Act is of the Newport News Shipbuilders Strike in Richmond, Virginia, where thousands of striking workers were forced back to work with no contract and no union. The Coors Beer Strike of Denver, Colorado, which forced workers to call a boycott because the company refused to negotiate, the Marathon Le Tourneau Strike in Brownsville, Texas, where 600 union workers stood by and watched the company destroy their union, even while they were on strike.

Another thing the Taft-Hartley Act did was to allow states to pass right-to-work laws plus other laws governing labor activities which were used against workers in their attempts to organize. This law literally destroys the right of free speech and assembly, mass picketing, secondary boycotts and requires registration of union organizers. These laws are so effectively used in right-to-work states that unionization movements in many of these states have virtually been stopped in its tracks.

In Texas, these laws and the Texas Rangers effectively defeated the right of farmworkers to organize in Starr County during the strike of 1966-67, by arrests of several hundred strikers, tying up over \$40,000 in cash bonds, and then by the courts granting a 30 day injunction which forbade all picket lines, public demonstrations, markers, etc. This 30-day injunction was in effect for six years, from 1967 to 1973, and destroyed the workers campaign to unionize.

These laws attack not only the organizing drive of workers but through the supposedly right-to-work law which provides neither work nor rights. Individual states have taken away the right of workers to organize a union shop. A union shop is one where every worker in the shop or field must belong to the union, all pay dues and all receive equal benefits. This law then stipulates that any worker has the right to join or not to join a union and that union membership cannot be required as any condition to employment.

What in fact this law does is allow the company to legally hire anti-union employees and in reality allows the company to discriminate in its treatment of employees based on union membership, in this fashion, making it seem economically beneficial to the workers to not join the union in order to avoid harassment. The company will in turn fire the active union members in order to set them up as an example. They do this knowing that the Taft-Hartely Act has slowed and weakened the process so much that it will take over two years to process the case and the penalty for fines are so small that the possible economic cost to the company is next to nothing. All of this that the company is able to do, destroys the workers willingness to fight and inturn destroys the union, so that once again they can exploit the workers without any hesitation.

It is because of this that the Texas Farm Workers' Union has made the commitment to continuously work against this law and we will do everything in our power to educate the public and work so that one day a national campaign can be launched against this law and finally it will be defeated.

We have made this long and tedious outline of our purpose and goals, the last thing left for us to explain to you is how you can help the farmworkers, not only in Texas, but all laborers that live in the slums of the cities.

As you know, with the exception of California and Hawaii, there are no other states that have collective bargaining rights for farmworkers. California struggled for more than 15 years in order to obtain those rights. Although these rights have been won, each day the growers try to eliminate these laws. You are probably asking yourselves how it is possible that in no other state in the nation is there a law that has been attacked so strongly by the growers. Perhaps you never thought of how the National Farm Bureau is trying to stop the organizing efforts of Cesar Chavez. The Farm Bureau is convinced that by defeating the farmworker movement in California that collective bargaining rights for farmworkers will not be extended to any other state.

Because of this, we must start collective bargaining rights campaigns in the different states of this nation. We shouldn't be waiting and only watching the ups and downs of California or to say to ourselves that we don't need to do something about the suffering of our local farmworkers because Cesar will be here as soon as he finishes California, because he is the only one who can put an end to these injustices.

We ask you to examine that concept in the same way people think that Jesus Christ will be the only one to end all the injustices on earth. That is why individuals follow the example of the priesthood in their eagerness to try to bring justice to the poor, they try to better the world by stopping injustices, so that in the second coming of Christ, it will be easier for him. Therefore, we are trying to establish the local bases for the day when it will be easier to finish the organization of all the farmworkers.

Because of this, we invite you to be with us and help us to form a national committee, so that in Washington, D.C. we will be able to seek National Collective Bargaining Rights and in your state you can open and direct another new front against the Farm Bureau and in this way you will be doing two jobs. One, to stop the strong attack on California and especially Cesar Chavez. And two, you can be organizing in your state so that the farmworkers in your state will understand that the passage of legislation is a long and difficult task and they will also learn and understand the power of the forces that oppose them.

These are our goals for the 80's and you can help us by participating and by taking action, not only by being a spectator, but you can be one of the vanguards and help all the workers, especially the farmworkers. This way you will find more satisfaction in the accomplishment of helping the human race and not just the personal successes of an individual.

This is our strategy for the 80's, the strategy of the Texas Farm Workers' Union and you can assist us. Remember you have something we need, and that is your active support and your cooperation in order to solve our problems together.

If you want to help us to obtain collective bargaining rights for farmworkers in Texas and in all the states in the nation, let us know and we will gladly further explain to you the Chicano strategy and brotherhood of the 80's.

For further information, contact: TEXAS FARM WORKERS' UNION
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